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Collectanea Theologica 68/Fasciculus specialis, 83-88

1998

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MICHAŁ WOJCIECHOWSKI

MORE ABOUT THE ANTI-JEWISH BIAS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT TRANSLATIONS

I wrote in Polish about translating the New Testament texts on the Jews¹. In my article I considered selected texts from 11 modern Polish New Testament translations. I found that in some points most of these translations weaken the theological appreciation of Israel or strengthen criticisms against her. However, directing our attention to the same set of biblical texts, we shall be able find some slightly biased translations in the most widely accepted modern versions in English, French and German as well.

My second reference point would be the article of Roger L. Omanon, *Translating the Anti-Jewish Bias of the New Testament*, being a successful summary of the state of question (published with a bibliography in *The Bible Translator* 43(1992)3, 301-313). I shall try to indicate some more New Testament texts involving translation problems, either well known or overlooked.

Judeans or Jews?

Greek *Ioudaios* could be rendered by "Judean" rather than "Jew" (in Polish three modern translations followed that path²). It results

¹ M. Wojciechowski, *Nowotestamentowe teksty o Żydach w nowszych polskich przekładach biblijnych*, "Collectanea Theologica" 53(1993)2, 79-88.

² In our language the problem is more acute: the word "Jew" - Żyd in Polish - is derived from "Juda", but it cannot be felt by the reader. In languages where both words are close, the problem appear less sharply.

from ethnic and geographical associations proper to the Greek word *Ioudaios*, clearly derived from *Ioudaia* - Judea³; it is more than a mere etymology. At the same time, there would be no doubt for the reader of such a translation, that Judeans are members of the Jewish people confessing the Jewish faith, although they do not necessarily represent all the Jews. This way of translating can protect against false generalisations of the New Testament texts.

Some authors do maintain, of course, that in John "Jews" in general are actually meant, and subsequently that this Gospel is anti-Jewish⁴. However, the "Jews" of John did live in Judea. Even in Jn 4.22 a predominantly religious aspect of *Ioudaioi* is by no means obvious: the context says about the conflict between Samaritan Garizim and Judean Jerusalem! Few New Testament texts (e.g. Rm 2.17,28f; 3.1,9; 1 Cor 9.20) stress the religious meaning – in these cases the positive one; translating "Jews" here raises no questions.

Israel and the salvation

Jn 4.22 says "Salvation is from the Jews (Judeans)" – *he soteria ek ton Ioudaion estin*: if we tried to trace the Semitic background of the saying, the word "is" would disappear: "Salvation from the Jews" (Delitsch translated: *hayesu^cah min-hayyehudim, hi*). In spite of it, many translations supply the verb "comes" instead of "is" ("comes": REB; "vient": BJ, TOB; "kommt": Luther 1964, *Einheitsübersetzung*). It makes the sentence sound better, but it also introduces a subconscious Christian suggestion, that the Jews are a mere starting-point for the salvation.

³ With the word "Greek" the reverse is true: in modern languages it is associated with the geographical Greece, although Hellenes in the New Testament period referred to the people of Greek language and culture. "Jews and Greeks" were "Judeans and Hellens"...

⁴ Especially P.J. Tomson in his highly informative article *The Names Israel and Jew in Ancient Judaism and in the New Testament*, *Bijdragen*, 47(1986), 120-140, 166-289 - he has stressed, however, the Jewish usage, excluding from his method the etymological, geographical and political associations proper to Greek.

In **Rm 11,1-2** we read: "Has God rejected his people? By no means! (...) God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew". The verb "reject" charged with theological and eschatological associations is predominantly used (RSV, REB, NIV; "rejeté": BJ, TOB; "verstossen" in German).

This interpretation appears also in the subtitles in Rm 9-11 (RSV – "rejection" – instead of a "non-rejection"...; NIV: "unbelief" and "Remnant"; BJ: "infidélité" – "Reste"; Luther 1964 "falsche Entscheidung". "nicht ganz Israel ist verstockt").

A better rendering of *aposato* would be however "pushed away"⁵ (from oneself), or even "aside" (repousser; zurückweisen, abschieben), which describe a more common, non-theological and rather emotional behaviour. Such "pushing away" quite obviously cannot be attributed to God; the Paul's question contains already an answer. Moreover, "has not rejected" is a neuter statement, whereas "has not pushed away" suggests a maintained, warm relation, in accordance with Paul's intention.

Associating the Jews with rejecting surfaces also in **Acts 13.46**, where their reaction to the word of God is described by *apothesthe*, translated "thrust away" (RSV), "reject" (REB, NIV) "von euch stosset" (Luther), "zurückstosset" (*Einheitsübersetzung*), although "push away, aside" would be more proper ("repousser" BJ, TOB).⁶

In **Rm 3.22; 10.12** the "distinction" (RSV, REB) should be preferred to the "difference" (NIV, cf. BJ, TOB: "Unterschied" in German): it represents better *diastole*, denoting in Greek an act of introducing or perceiving the distinction rather than an objective difference. It is not a matter of theological theory; the attitude of the reader towards the Jews is challenged here.

The word, *to perisson* in **Rm 3.1a** is translated "advantage", "superiorité", "Vorzug": "What advantage has the Jew?". A stronger expression would render the meaning better: "In which respect is the Jew extraordinary?". "Advantage" is too limited, "superiority" - relative.

⁵ M. Zerwick, M. Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, Rome 1981, 483.

⁶ The same verb in Acts 7.27.39 and 1 Tim 1.19 is sometimes rendered "reject", sometimes "push", "thrust", "spurn" etc.

In the next verse, a subtle mistake is found in most translations. **Rm 3.1b** follows: “Or what is the value of circumcision?” (here “advantage” or even “income” would fit). 3.2a: “Much (*poly*) in every way”. *Poly* is neuter and therefore refers only to *to perisson*, as the Greek words for “value” (*ofeleia*) and “circumcision” (*peritome*) are both feminine. Most translations, however place “much” in such a way, that it must be associated with the preceding “value of the circumcision” first (at best “much” refers to both “advantage” and “value”); only after the next words (v.2b: “To begin with, the Jews”) the attention of the reader turns back to the initial question. In Rm 3.2a he will find a great value of circumcision, irrelevant for a Christian, instead of a great “extraordinariness” of the Jews.

To improve this translation in English it would be proper to put v.1b in brackets: in French and German one should look for nouns differing in gender. In such a way the Vulgate, Old Slavonic and the standard Russian ‘Synodal’ translation have easily solved the problem.

Criticisms against the Jews

In **1 Thes 2.14** there is a question of “congregations of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea”, and therefore their persecutors should be called “Judeans”, not “Jews” - but translations do not follow this path (older ones through an anti-Jewish bias, modern - to avoid a suspicion that they dissimulate the problem?). The use of “church” instead of “congregation” also contributes to a widening and actualisation of meaning.

V.15 continues the polemic description of Judeans, whether all of them (comma, non-restrictive clause) or the persecutors (restrictive clause)⁷. Some translations, however, tend to generalize the accusations against them by putting a point after v.14 and inside v.15 (Luther, *Einheitsübersetzung*: “(...) von den Juden. Diese haben sogar Jesus, den

⁷ Cf. R.L.Omanson, 308, quoting F. Gilliard, *The Problem of the Antisemitic Comma Between 1 Thessalonians 2.14 and 15*, “New Testament Studies” 35 (1989), 481-502.

Herrn, und die Propheten getötet (...). Sie missfallen Gott und sind Feinde aller Menschen”). The beginning of v.15 with a stressed pronoun related to the “Jews” (“eux” TOB, “Ces gens-là” BJ) contributes to the same effect.

Rm 9.31 is usually understood: “Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it”. “Not attained” corresponds to *ouk efhassen*. The regular classical meaning of *fihamo* is however “precede, come first”. It can be found in the contemporary Pauline letters: 2 Cor 10.14 (widely admitted) and Phil 3.16 (overlooked); the Hellenistic wider meaning “reach, come” appears in Mt 12.28/Lk 11.20 and 1 Thes 2.16. *Fihamo* with the preceding *dioko* (“pursue”) and *katalambano* (“attain”) can belong to a set of comparisons taken from a sport event⁸. Rm 9.31 says that Israel “running in the competition” did not come first to the Law, was outpaced (by the gentiles or by the Law itself).

Therefore all the translations saying that Israel “did not attained” (NIV), or even “never attained to it” (REB - this translation overtly manifests what in other ones remains a suggestion), “did not succeeded in fulfilling” (RSV), “nicht erreicht” (Luther), “verfehlt” (*Einheitsübersetzung*), “n’a pas atteint” (BJ), “passé à côté” (TOB), are all guilty of unjustified strengthening the Pauline criticism.

A tendency to the sharpening of terms can be found in **Rm 10.21**. “I have held out my hands to the people”: *apeithounta* (“not persuaded”) and *antilegonta* (“contrary”, opposed in a discussion). Translations prefer however “disobedient, désobéissant, indocile, ungehorsam” and “defiant, obstinate, rebelle, widerspenstig” (RSV and Luther 1964 are more adequate).

Similarly *apeithesantes*, some not persuaded Jews in **Acts 14,2** are called “unbelieving (RSV), unconverted (REB), who refused to believe (NIV)”, “incrédules” (BJ), “ungläubig” (Luther); these adjectives apparently fit well with “the Jews”... Better translations can be found in TOB and *Einheitsübersetzung*.

In **John 6.6** we find: “This he said, to test him”; “test” *peirazo*. Here Jesus tests a disciple - but elsewhere the Jews or the Pharisees do not

⁸ I owe this remarks to the suggestions of R. Popowski included in our inter-linear Polish translation of the New Testament: *Grecko-polski Nowy Testament*, Warsaw 1993.

necessarily test Jesus, although the same verb *peirazo* is used (in the context of a rabbinic dispute the corresponding verb would be *ldbwg* - to check someone's opinion⁹). Often we can find instead "set a trap": in French "tendre une piège" (TOB: Mt 16.1; 19.3; 22.18,35; Mk 8.11; Jn 5,6; BJ: Mt 22.18); in English "trap" appears in NIV Mt 22.18; Jn 8.6, "catch out" in Mt 22.18.35 REB; in German - "eine Falle stellen" (*Einheitsübersetzung* Mt. 19.3; 22.18), "versuchen" ("try, tempt", Luther); "put to the test" is used by BJ ("mettre à l'épreuve") and *Einheitsübersetzung* ("auf die Probe stellen").

Some of examples quoted above are perhaps open to discussion or illustrate only shades of meaning. Nevertheless they prove that even good translations are not immune to a subconscious, traditional anti-Jewish bias. The best protection against, it seems however not an equally tendencious censorship, but a faithful, even literal rendering, because a loose, "today's" version has to be more exposed on all kind of conscient or unconscient bias.

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⁹ Ch. Safrai during the SBL International Meeting in Rome, 14-17 July 1991.